

Military to Civilian Conversion: Where Effectiveness Meets Efficiency

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Military to Civilian Conversion:
Where Effectiveness Meets Efficiency
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To
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With the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) and Marine Corps human and materiel resources being stretched to the limit, the need for Marines in the Operating Forces has never been greater. Many Marines are currently deployed in Afghanistan or Iraq, some on their second or even third tour in that country. Still others are deployed in response to humanitarian assistance operations, other contingencies, or as part of routine deployments.

There are incredible demands on Marine Corps recruiting and manpower to seek out and train qualified personnel, and to retain and appropriately assign quality Marines. In an effort to alleviate some of this demand, an available resource of Marines is now being tapped. Necessity has forced the Marine Corps to look toward billets in the supporting establishments (bases and stations) that do not have to be filled by Marines, and convert those billets over to civilians as a solution to the shortage in manpower. "The Secretary of Defense mandated that each military service branch convert a specific number of military billets to civilian billets. The Marine Corps was tasked with converting no less than 1372 billets in FY05", says Master Sergeant Thomas Delaney of the Logistics Modernization Transition Task Force at Headquarters Marine Corps.¹ A plethora of billets in the Marine Corps' bases and stations are currently being filled by Marines who could be performing their MOS

specific role in the Operating Forces. Many of these billets do not require Marines and could easily be converted to civilian jobs. To that end, Marine billets without a warfighting application should be civilianized to relieve the shortage of manpower in the Operating Forces.

A Well Trained Force

Marines usually call what they do "work" or their "job", when in actuality, they are training. Everything Marines do on a daily basis should be focused on training and preparing for war, and Marines should be training to perform their MOS specific role in a wartime scenario. The focus of all Marine training, and subsequently all Marine billet assignments, should be to sharpen a Marine's skills in order for him or her to better perform their role in combat. Base and station tours that do not achieve this end should be civilianized. "It doesn't make sense to have Marines doing things that are not inherently military", says Lieutenant Colonel Edward Martin, Deputy Director of Logistics at Marine Corps Base Quantico. "Anytime you can get Marines back into the operating forces, that is a good thing." ²

Every Marine should leave his or her last assignment better prepared to serve to the advantage of the Marine Corps in battle. Many base and station tours do not do this, in fact,

they often allow a Marine's skills to dull over the two or three years that he or she is in that billet and not deploying.

However, there are necessary exceptions that should not be considered for conversion. Non-fleet tours or "B billets" like recruiting, training, and other billets within the supporting establishment, must be done by Marines. The Marine Corps still needs professional recruiters to sell the Marine Corps to young adults. There will always be a need for Marines at the recruit depots, Officer Candidates School, and other schools and training commands. Also, there are numerous base and station tours that keep a Marine's MOS skills sharp, even though he or she is not in the operating forces and not deploying. The aforementioned exceptions notwithstanding, keeping as many Marines as possible in the Operating Forces and in their MOS will help ensure that the Marine Corps maintains a well trained force.

Returning Marine billets to the Operating Forces and retaining them

Civilianizing billets that do not require Marines will return desperately needed Marines to the Operating Forces. It will ease some the burden of the Marine Corp's recruiting, retention, and staffing challenges. Many operating force units

are below staffing goal and need the Marines that are trapped in base and station billets.

Also, many base and station jobs are mundane. Most young adults join the Marine Corps for a challenge and some excitement. Some new Marines end up in assignments in the supporting establishments that give them neither. They soon become bored and complacent. As MOS skills dull and job satisfaction fades, so does the desire to stay in the Marine Corps. First term Marines, the hardest category to reenlist, often fall into this paradox and leave the Marine Corps after their end of obligated service. The Marine Corps loses a quality Marine unnecessarily.

Who should convert and how?

The leadership at Marine Corps bases and stations need to look at all Marine billets there and ask:

1. Does this job have to be done by a Marine?
2. Does this job have a wartime application?

If the answer to either question is no, then converting the billet to a civilian job should be considered. Candidates for conversion are typically found in the provost marshal's office,

game warden's office, supply and logistics, facilities and maintenance, transportation, housing and traffic management, etc.

Base and station business performance offices have the available resources to work with units and civilian human resources departments to identify suitable candidates for conversion and assist during the transition process. The process is relatively simple:

1. Identify candidates for conversion.
2. Work with Marine higher headquarters (manpower) to return those billets to the Operating Forces and assign them appropriately.
3. Advertise, recruit, and train the new civilian force.
4. Return Marines to the Operating Forces.

The Benefits

The benefits of Military to Civilian conversion are abundant, both at the strategic level where the aim is efficiency, and at the tactical level where the goal is

effectiveness. Once complete, quality Marines return to the Operating Forces, alleviating some of the recruiting and retention burden, and apply their MOS specific skill where it is needed the most: in the Operating Forces. Ideally, the Marine has more job satisfaction and stays in the Corps. The civilians replacing the billets formerly held by Marines will provide long-term continuity, which increases proficiency over time and ultimately improves the services provided in the supporting establishments.

Counter argument

Some Marines look around the bases and stations and swear that the Marine Corps is being contracted out. Where a Marine used to be greeted by another Marine at the supply or housing office front desk, there is now a civilian. What many don't know is that it's actually less expensive to pay civilians to do the same job. Most civilians are considered a .7 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) to a Marine. That means that where ten Marines would be required to perform a function, the same function could be done by seven civilians. The logic behind this formula is based on the amount of time that Marines spend away from their job attending required training, professional military education, temporary additional duty, leave, and liberty. Most civilian union contracts stipulate longer hours and less time

off than their Marine counterparts who work in the same base or station office. "The reality of Military to Civilian Conversion is that we're not trying to reduce the size of the Corps. On the contrary, we're trying to create more warfighters without increasing Marine Corps structure". ³

Another argument is that Marines like having a Marine behind the counter to help them, because a fellow Marine better understands the situation and needs of another Marine. Rest assured that that Marine can provide a better service to his fellow Marines by being back in the fleet, doing his or her MOS specific duty, and providing quality service support in the Operating Forces. The same quality service will also be provided by civilians who can stay in the job longer, as the turnover is not as high as a Marine who will transfer every two years. Civilians provide long term continuity to supporting establishment billets, increasing proficiency and effectiveness.

In spite of the numerous benefits of Military to Civilian conversion, a measure of caution must be taken when considering potential candidates. Military to civilian conversion efforts must be conducted with the knowledge that Marine Corps bases and stations exist to support the training, equipping, and deployment of Marine forces. Marine Corps installations, the "fifth element of the MAGTF, exist only to support the Operating Forces". ⁴ Military to civilian conversions should not degrade

this effort by reducing responsiveness or eliminating essential functions and services that are best done by Marines.

Conclusion

Most of the Department of Defense has studied the benefits of converting non-essential military billets over to civilians and has implemented numerous conversions. The Marine Corps is now embracing this idea and doing the same.⁵ For example, Marine Corps Base Quantico is currently in the process of converting nearly 100 billets over to civilians during Fiscal Year 2005. Most of the billets are within the bases's Logistics and Facilities Divisions.⁶ The Marines currently assigned to those billets will train the incoming civilian force, and then those Marines will return to the Operating Forces where they are needed most.

The benefits of military to civilian conversion are abundant. The Marine Corps should continue to exploit this human resource and return Marines to the Operating Forces in order to relieve some of the recruiting, retention, and staffing challenges. Military to civilian conversion successfully marries the best of the strategic and tactical worlds, where effectiveness meets efficiency.

Notes

¹ Master Sergeant T. A. DeLaney, Logistics Modernization Transition Task Force, Installations and Logistics, Headquarters Marine Corps, USMC, letter to author, January

² Lieutenant Colonel E. Martin, Deputy Director, Logistics Division, Marine Corps Base Quantico, USMC, letter to author, January

³ Master Sergeant T. A. DeLaney, Logistics Modernization Transition Task Force, Installations and Logistics, Headquarters Marine Corps, USMC, letter to author, January 24, 2005.

⁴ Stephen A. Vines, "Installations Strategic Planning", Marine Corps Gazette, October 2004, 18.

⁵ Marine Corps Administrative Message (MARADMIN) 027/04.

⁶ Lieutenant Colonel E. Martin, Deputy Director, Logistics Division, Marine Corps Base Quantico, USMC, letter to author, January 26, 2005.

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